

**Broken Spirit: The Role of the Catholic Church
in the Deculturization of the Blackfeet Nation**

by

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis.

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I dedicate this thesis to the people of the Blackfeet Nation, both living and gone; with special remembrance to Gladys Kimball and Jerome Marble, and to my mother Roberta Baumann, who walks the walk. May your spirits and hearts be filled with happiness and peace.

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Abstract: This thesis utilizes settler-colonialism theory to examine the role of the Catholic Church, via the Holy Family Mission School (1888-1940), in the deculturization of the Blackfeet Nation. Beginning in the 1800's and continuing through the 1960's, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) established Indian boarding schools under the theory that assimilation through education would accomplish the colonialist-governmental goal of "kill the Indian and save the man." Some schools were contracted to, and administered by, the Catholic Church. The Holy Family Mission School was established on the Blackfeet Reservation in 1888 to replace the traditional upbringing of Blackfeet children with an assimilation curriculum focused on reading and writing English, and Catholic doctrine. The children were removed from their families to live year-round at the mission, with the priests and sisters usurping the role of parent. No longer were the children trained by family members in the traditional ways of their people. They were prohibited from dressing according to tradition, speaking their language, and practicing their customs and religious beliefs. When the Catholic Church forbid students to speak the Blackfoot language, removed them from their families, denied cultural dress, and vilified Blackfeet religion, they [Catholic Church] perpetrated horrendous acts of deculturization. The Blackfeet Nation experienced a significant loss of language and culture during the Holy Family Mission School period, which continues to facilitate the on-going silence and erasure of the Blackfeet identity today. Through the use of historical analysis, informal interviews, indigenous authored literature, and settler-colonialism theory, this thesis documents and argues that the Catholic Church maintains culpability in the dark legacy of the Indian boarding school system.

“What we learned about the mission school was from hearing other people talking about it. We didn’t ask Mom about it, because she got emotional, teary, and refused to talk about it if we asked. We knew she hated it and hated being away from her family. The teachers were cruel and the children suffered, but they learned to be ‘good Catholics’.”

- Response of Blackfeet tribal member (BF06) to a question about her mother’s experience at Holy Family Mission.

Introduction

The education of Indian children has a long and sordid history in the United States. From 1888 through 1940, the Holy Family Mission School (HFMS) of the Catholic Church, acting as a tool of the American settler-colonialist government, functioned as a boarding schooling for native children on the Blackfeet Reservation in Browning, Montana. Considerable research has been conducted analyzing the repercussions of forced assimilation through the indigenous boarding school experience, yet there is little information available that addresses the role of the Catholic Church in the deculturization of the Blackfeet Nation.¹

The repercussions of deculturization continue to haunt the Blackfeet people and contribute to their disproportionately high rates of suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, depression, school drop-out, and unemployment (Adams, 1995). In addition, deculturization encouraged an unnatural dependence of the Blackfeet on its settler-colonialist oppressors. This ‘ration mentality’ is a product of deculturization and has affected the ability

¹ For the purposes of this research, deculturization is defined as the intentional process of the dominant group to strip indigenous language, culture, and religion from a ‘conquered’ group, replacing it with the dominant groups’ ideals and beliefs.

of the Blackfeet to think and act effectively as an independent people and nation. Ration mentality initially developed in the Blackfeet mind through the shocking reality that survival depended on capitulating to settler-colonialist demands in exchange for food and shelter. The Church/State fused entity [of the government and the Catholic Church] encouraged this dependent way of thought, as it created docility and complicity. The ration mentality has become so ingrained in the Blackfeet of today that they have become their own oppressors, without the need of outside intimidation.

In this thesis I outline the progression of Blackfeet society prior to the inception of the HFMS, and Blackfeet society today. My analysis indicates that the HFMS perpetrated deculturization (under the umbrella of the Catholic Church and the United States government) which resulted in the loss of language, customs, religion, and independence of the Blackfeet people.

Theory & Methods

I draw on the theory of settler-colonialism to critically examine the relationship between the Blackfeet Nation and the Catholic Church. Colonialization is a process that displaces and eliminates indigenous societies in order to gain access and control over their lands and resources; therefore, decolonialization, or the *removal* of colonialization, implies that indigenous peoples have the ability to ‘reclaim’ that which was physically taken from them during colonialization. Decolonialization therefore, is not realistic as the settler-colonialists have become the dominant power to which all United States citizens, including Native Americans, are subject. Ironically, the settler-colonialist ideology of a democracy ‘of the people, by the people, and for the people’ has established a history that betrays those very principles (Gilo-Whataker, 2015). Settler-colonialism is based on the principle that non-white people be viewed as ‘less than’ civilized, and places them under the superiority and normality of their white oppressors (Wynter, 2003).

Methods used for the purpose of this research include ethnographic unstructured interviews, historical data analysis, and available qualitative data.² Ethnographic research was completed by conducting informal open-ended interviews with five Blackfeet tribal members living on reservation, and three tribal members living off reservation.³ Participants are not identified by name throughout this study for the purpose of anonymity, and when necessary for clarity are referenced with the initials BF (Blackfeet) and an assigned number (i.e., BF03).

² Unless otherwise noted the historical and qualitative data were located through the O’Grady Library at Saint Martin’s University, or the Medicine Spring Library at Blackfeet Community College in Browning, Montana.

³ For further demographical information see Table 1-A in Appendix.

The content of the interviews revolved around historical and current reservation life with a focus on education, language, religion, and the Holy Family Mission School.⁴ Participant recruitment was conducted using informal social networks by contacting a known tribal elder (BF01) and requesting that he make contact with other tribal members who might be interested in sharing their perspective of reservation life related to the HFMS. All participants had some cursory knowledge of this researcher and were aware that I was conducting research related to the HFMS and its historical role in the education of Blackfeet children.⁵

It is obvious to even the casual observer that the Blackfeet Nation experienced significant loss of language and culture since the onset of colonialism. This thesis defends the position that the Catholic Church, through the operation of the Holy Family Mission School, maintain some degree of culpability in this loss. To fully comprehend the extent of the deculturization of the Blackfeet Nation, I begin with a historical summary of who the Blackfeet were prior to colonization and the influence of the Catholic Church.

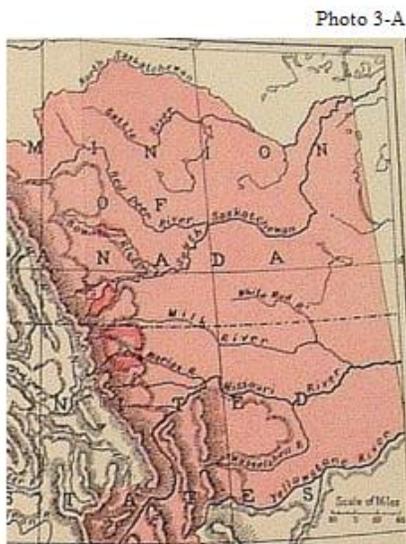
⁴ 'Historical' reservation life refers to reservation history as told to the participant(s) by tribal elders (i.e., parents, grandparents, etc.).

⁵ See 'Consent to Participate' in Appendix (p. 35-37).

Traditional Blackfeet Culture – PreColonialism

The Blackfeet are historically comprised of three distinct tribes: the Northern Blackfeet [Siksika], the Blood [Kainah], and the Blackfeet [Piegan/Pikuni] (Grinnell, 1892). These three tribes together compose the Blackfoot Confederacy.⁶ The Confederacy's relationship with settler-colonialists can be divided into what Harrod (1971) refers to as "two broadly distinguishable periods" (1971, p. xix). The pre-colonialist period, lasting through approximately 1830, was a time of relatively stable economic, political, religious, and cultural autonomy for the Blackfeet. The confederated tribes would occasionally join together for several reasons, including warfare against outside tribes, religious ceremonies (Sun Dance), and the development of family relationships. The second period began with the influx of white settler contact (1830's forward) and the subsequent devastation of traditional culture.

Prior to colonization of the northern plains in the mid-19th century, the Blackfeet



Traditional Blackfeet Territory 1700-1800's
Photo credit: blackfeetcountry.com

lived nomadically in a broad area west by the Rocky Mountains, north by the Saskatchewan River, south by the Missouri River, and east by the Milk River, in what is now known as the state of Montana and southern Canada (Ewers, 1958). The Blackfeet were so well known for their horsemanship and fighting ability that other white-friendly tribes warned explorers away from Blackfeet territory (Grinnell, 1892).

⁶ Tribal names in parenthesis are the historical Blackfoot language names of each tribe. For the purposes of this paper I will refer to the Montana Piegan as Blackfeet, as that is their federally recognized tribal affiliation.

Traditional Blackfeet economy was greatly influenced by the environmental extremes of life on the northern plains. Sweltering summers and freezing winters with abundant snowfall and high winds made the area unsuitable for agriculture, but ideal for buffalo. Plant life for food was taken as was found in travel, but the traditional diet was 90% protein (Ewers, 1958). Blackfeet culture was centered on the migration patterns of the buffalo. Buffalo was so central to Blackfeet tribal, social, economic, political, and religious life that this centrality was reflected in the necessity of the hunt. Everything revolved around the movement of the buffalo. Blackfeet men were the hunters and Blackfeet women were responsible for preparing and preserving the spoils of the hunt.

The education of Blackfeet children was informal and revolved around daily lives and customs. Boys began attending the hunt at an early age (often around the age of 10 years) to observe and learn the traditional hunting techniques, and were active hunting participants by the early teenage years. Hunting was a man's primary economic function and served as the conduit to education in the tribes' social values, which focused on generosity (Grinnell, 1892). Status and political power came to hunters who were generous with the elderly and widowed, while those regarded as stingy or selfish were looked down upon and avoided.

Girls began working alongside their mothers and grandmothers at approximately eight years of age, learning the skills that would make them desirable wives: sewing clothes and lodges, dressing buffalo hides, cooking, cleaning, and childcare of younger siblings (Ewers, 1958). Both male and female children listened and learned traditional stories of Blackfeet life. An animated story teller was highly regarded within the tribe.

Blackfoot tribes were divided into bands, typically composed of familial ties. Bands were all part of the Blackfoot tribe, but had unique names identifying them to other bands.⁷ At the head of each band was the chief, whom was typically chosen for his generosity, hunting skills, and fighting bravery. The band chief was responsible for defending the social order, preserving peace within the band, and protecting the band from outside aggressors. Discipline within the band was accomplished by public shaming of the transgressor, with the opportunity of reconciliation through heroic or generous deeds (Ewers, 1958).

Blackfoot life was divided by the seasons and the movements that came with these seasons: winter camp, spring hunting and gathering, summer hunting and Sun Dance season, and fall hunting and gathering. The tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy gathered together during the summer Sun Dance season to practice their religion and find suitable mates for young tribal members. Summer presented opportunity for tribal council, which consisted of all band chiefs and one tribal chief.⁸

Personal identity as a band and tribe member was closely aligned with social institutions. Men belonged to ‘age-graded’ societies, collectively called the ‘All Comrades’. There were seven age-graded groups within the All Comrades (the Mosquitoes, the Dogs, the Prairie Dogs, the Ravens, the Buffalo with Thin Horns, the Soldiers, and the Buffalo Bulls), with entry into the Mosquitoes being bought by a young man from an older man. The man would then progress through the groups, approximately every four years, by buying and selling membership. Boys grew up watching their fathers and grandfathers progress, or not progress, through the ranks of the ‘All Comrades’, thus receiving an informal education in

⁷ For example, my familial band was known as ‘the green wood burners’.

⁸ Tribal chieftdom was hereditary in nature and held little political power throughout the remaining three seasons. The tribal chief was responsible for acting in the role of chairman during tribal council.

their own future civic responsibility as a male tribal member. Not all men would reach the Buffalo Bulls, for some wealth was required as the 'price' for membership grew increasingly with the status of the upper level groups. The age-graded societies were essential to establishing a sense of belonging, purpose, and status for Blackfoot men.

The 'All Comrades' also took the role of band police or soldiers. While traveling they protected the front, flanks, and rear of the tribe (Harrod, 1971). During the summer Sun Dance ceremony they maintained order within the bands encampment. An ethic of a common good and social responsibility regulated elements of Blackfoot social life, and punishment for violating that ethic was the responsibility of the 'All Comrades'. Perhaps their most consistent and necessary role in maintaining harmony within the band was disciplining the selfish hunter. Generosity was highly respected among the tribe, especially generosity towards the weak, disabled, or elderly. The hunt was essential to life and supplied the entire band with food, skins for clothing and lodges, and ceremonial buffalo tongue for use in the Sun Dance. Selfish men who refused to hunt or were stingy with the spoils of hunt, were stripped of their clothing and possessions and left to walk naked and alone. The first time offender could make amends by hunting alone and giving away the meat and skins, or by performing singular acts of bravery. Repeat offenders were ridiculed publicly and abandoned by their band. Wives and children of the shunned stayed with the tribe and were absorbed into another man's household.

Blackfoot women's sense of self-worth was found in their duty as wives and mothers. One of the most valued virtues for women was fidelity in marriage. As marriage and family was the primary social institution in Blackfoot society, failure to uphold the traditional standards resulted in harsh repercussions. If a woman was found to be unfaithful the All

Comrades would shame her with public molestation, or in the case of serious offenses, cut off her nose and ostracize her from the band (Grinnell, 1892).⁹ If a woman was shunned from the band, her children remained and were taken in by the ‘victim’ husbands’ other wives. Blackfeet families were composed of a husband and several wives. Many wives increased a man’s social status, and marriage to a man with many wives increased a woman’s social status. Children slept in the lodge of their mothers, but interacted with their fathers’ other wives and children daily in a firm familial unit.

The Blackfeet religion was not a separate part of tribal life. Children learned at a young age that the world was created by Napi (Old Man), and that ‘the people’¹⁰ were created by Napi and Old Woman (McClintock, 1910). Infused in the world and environment was Power which flowed through the earth and the people in a constant stream.¹¹ Communications of Power often took place during sleep in the form of a dream, but could also be found in natural weather phenomena, through animals, or other people. Prayer streamed throughout daily life and although it appeared that the people were praying ‘to’ animals or the sun, it was in actuality to the “greater Spirit beyond, that gave the Power for an intercession” (Harrod, 1971, p. 13). In the world of the Blackfeet, it was not uncommon or unusual for animals to speak to people or for elements like the sun and rain to shift change into people for the purpose of communication. When the Power or spirit world communicated with a person, they would bring the conversation to the medicine man for contemplation and assistance. A medicine man or woman was a specially appointed person

⁹ It is believed that many women disciplined in this manner died from infection and other medical complications.

¹⁰ How Blackfeet traditionally refer to themselves as a whole.

¹¹ ‘Power’ is realized in the deep connection between the environment and elements and Blackfeet people. This concept goes beyond the Blackfeet and is a common thread throughout indigenous religious beliefs.

whose knowledge and connection to the Power enabled him to assist others with their connection to the Power. The medicine man's interpretation of the message often led him to assisting in gathering the items needed for a 'spirit bundle'. The spirit bundle contained the power of the message and had an element of protection sent from the spirit world.

The ultimate religious ceremony for the Blackfeet was the Sun Dance. All bands and tribes of the Blackfoot Confederation would gather together to celebrate the successes and lament the failures of the year. The Sun Dance ceremony was led by a woman who had experienced a personal crisis within the year and prayed a vow to play the sacred role of medicine woman. A medicine woman had to extol the virtues of fidelity, honesty, and industriousness in her labors. During the Sun Dance gathering men and women would point the medicine woman out to their daughters and admonish them to be good and virtuous, so they could one day be like her (Ewers, 1958). Prior to the start of the Sun Dance the medicine woman would lead a select group of women in the ritual preparation and distribution of the buffalo tongues, which had been carefully gathered and preserved throughout the year. For women the Sun Dance was about virtue, and they would appeal to the sun to guide them in proving their virtue by allowing them to skin the tongue without "cutting a hole in it or cutting [their] fingers" (Harrod, 197, p. 17).

The Sun Dance presented the opportunity for men to extol their bravery in the presence of witnesses. Stories were told about counting coups, but the ultimate show of bravery was in the self-torture ceremony. During the self-torture ceremony incisions were made in the chest and back of participants and leather ropes or sticks were passed through the incisions and attached by a long rope to the center pole of the Sun Dance arena. The participant danced frantically while blood poured from his chest and back. Observers

watched reverently and exclaimed over his degree of pain and bravery. The man danced



Blackfoot Sundancer - circa 1910
Photo credit: www.American-Tribes.com

until the skewers ripped through his skin or he passed out from blood loss and pain. Medicine men and women then rallied to the fallen man and treated him with herbs. Many men died following this ordeal, but their exploits were spoken of in the highest esteem for generations and he became a model of courage.

The pre-colonialism Blackfeet were a complex, independent people with a finely developed social system comprised of education, tradition, religion, politics, and an economic system. Some white contact occurred during that period, but it was on the “terms of the Blackfeet” (Harrod, 1971, p. xx). Both Protestant and Catholic’s attempted to ‘missionize’ the Blackfeet, but were unsuccessful in overcoming traditional spiritual beliefs and customs.

Catholic Mission School History

The first three Catholic mission schools were opened on tribal lands in 1873, with the HFMS following suit in 1888 just outside of Browning, Montana (Black, 2014). The school remained active until closing its doors in 1940 due to increasing financial difficulties.¹² Today, a historical marker situated at the site of the HFMS whitewashes the reality of the deculturization that occurred from fifty years of Catholic education. The signs references the HFMS as ‘the first institution on the reservation to *offer* Blackfeet children an education’ effectively erases the Blackfeet tragedy of deculturization perpetrated by the Catholic Church.



Holy Family Mission (circa 2014)
Photo Credit: Author

According to Native anthropologist Carol Devens (1992), “The history of mission schools is a troubling one in which stories of benevolent, self-sacrificing missionaries

Photo 2-A



Holy Family Mission historical marker - Browning, Mt. (2014)
Photo Credit: Author

contend with accounts of relentlessly rigid discipline, ethnocentrism, and desperately unhappy children” (p. 220). The shared belief of the government and the Catholic Church that “once exposed to Christianity,

¹² The mission continues to be used today to celebrate special events and was listed on the ‘National Register of Historical Places’ in 1982.

civilization, and the English language, Native peoples would be eager to change their lives for the better” precipitated the tragedy of Blackfoot deculturization (Reyhner & Elder, 2004, p. 4).

From 1830 through the 1870’s colonialism struck the Blackfeet with a vengeance, causing societal collapse through a complicated series of events. The plagues of disease, alcohol, warfare, loss of tribal lands, and starvation struck a crushing blow to the Blackfeet way of life and existence. Although the Catholic Church was not directly involved in these physical acts, the Church had deep intellectual roots in the conception of colonialism, thus establishing its initial culpability.

In 1452, Pope Nicholas V issued a papal bull (*Romanus Pontifex*) sanctioning the conquest, *colonization*, and exploitation on all non-Christian nations and their lands. In 1493, Pope Alexander issued his own papal bull (*Inter Cetera*) instructing that all ‘discovered peoples be subjugated and brought to the faith itself’ (Newcomb, 2010). These papal bulls laid the intellectual foundation for what would in 1823 become the ‘Doctrine of Discovery’ in U.S. law. According to the Doctrine of Discovery the Indians “upon discovery” had lost “their right to complete sovereignty” and merely retained a right of “occupancy” (Newcomb, 2010, p. 101). This doctrine established that the indigenous peoples of North America were subject to the government of the United States.

Native Americans did not understand, nor recognize the Doctrine of Discovery and resisted governmental attempts at controlling and dictating tribal activity. Forced assimilation through education was a governmental attempt at solving what it saw as the ‘Indian problem’. Originally, the government developed their own Indian schools across the nation, but it soon realized that there were neither the time nor resources available within the

governmental industrial complex to effectively complete the task. Religious organizations, most notably the Catholic and Methodist Churches, were quick to realize that education was the doorway to introducing their own religious doctrines to the Native population in order to ‘save the souls’ of the heathen Indians. By the mid-1840’s Catholic and Methodist Churches were leading the charge in the race for Native American souls through education. School quickly became the primary means of persuading Native American children to reject tradition and embrace colonialist ways (Devens, 1992).

In the 1870’s the Grant Administration found themselves frustrated by the ‘Indian Problem’ and turned to religious organizations as a tool to assimilate and ‘civilize’ the Indian. The Catholic Church responded with enthusiasm and began establishing formal Catholic institutions on reservation lands. This ‘Church-State fusion’ effectively established the government in the role of colonialist, while the Church moved from missionary to governmental tool. The Church was well equipped for success in this endeavor, as they had begun establishing relationships with indigenous peoples early in the colonialism process.¹³

Under authority of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions (BCIM) and the United States Department of Interior, Catholic missions and schools became commonplace on Indian reservation nationwide by the mid 1880’s (Carroll, 1998). The BCIM formulated a plan for education of the Indian child based on the ideology of the commissioner of Indian affairs to civilize and educate, fully understanding that “to educate” meant “breaking up of tribal customs, manners and barbarous usages, and the assumption of the manners, usages, and

¹³ In 1840 Father Pierre De Smet, a Jesuit priest, made contact with some Blackfeet (through his relationship with the Flathead Nation), and performed several baptisms. St. Mary’s Mission was built in Missoula, Montana in the mid-1840’s followed by continuous Catholic outreach to the tribes of the Great Plains (Harrod 1971).

customs of the superior race with whom they are thereafter to be thrown into contact”

(Annual Reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1901, p. 9).

Photo 5-A



Saint Peter's Mission near Cascade, Montana - circa 1897

Photo credit: United States Government

In 1857, Jesuits' Father Hoecken and Brother Magri were sent by the head of Catholic Indian missions to find a site for St. Peter's mission in order to continue the work among the Blackfeet and

Flathead tribes.¹⁴ The mission was moved several times to facilitate conversion efforts, with a final settlement near Bird Tail Rock, south of Great Falls. St. Peter's was closed in 1869 due to financial difficulties, but reopened in 1874. Soon after, the government moved the border of the Blackfeet Reservation placing the mission sixty miles from the nearest Blackfeet territory. Missionary priests involved in the work of St. Peter's took the closing and distance of the mission from the reservation as a problem of such severity that it could spell the end of the Blackfeet, as they felt that it had been the mission alone that kept the tribe from death. Father Giorda reported to his superiors during that period: "What will these Indians do.....? They shall starve, and starve their children and women. When starving, what will they do? They will be at war with the whites....which will bring destruction of them, or draw them to a lower stage of savage and brutal existence. They will be like ghosts...living that wretched existence produced by the white man....." (Harrod, 1971, p. 57). When St. Peter's Mission reopened the Jesuits petitioned for Blackfeet children to live

¹⁴ Father Hoecken and Brother Magri were Jesuits of the Rocky Mountain missions, under the authority of Father Nicholas Congiato, S.J. (Schoenberg, 1961).



there and obtain a Catholic education.

However, the Blackfeet were not easily manipulated into giving up their children and responded with extreme resistance, which surprised both the government and the Church. In 1885, in response to Blackfeet resistance to removing their

children from their families, Father Damiani requested and received permission from his superiors at St. Peter's to build a mission and school on the Blackfeet reservation. A crude log church was built on the banks of the Two Medicine River near the government agency.

Chief White Calf, who had been converted and baptized, was persuaded to give a piece of his allotted land so that a 'farm' school could be built with private and governmental contributions. Initially a single wooden, two story dormitory was constructed for both male and female students, but eventually separate dormitories were erected to hold one-hundred children. Father Tornielli came to act as superintendent, along with Father Bougis, who came to teach. The Jesuits also recruited three Ursuline nuns and classes began in September of 1888.



Holy Family Mission School - circa 1901
Photo credit: www.blackfeetcountry.com

The priests and nuns traveled by wagon into the encampments collecting students' to attend school. The children and mother's ran from the wagons crying, but if families refused to send their children away the agent cut off their rations (BF05). The starvation

winter of 1883-84 was still fresh in the minds of the Blackfeet and they were easily frightened into sending their children with the priests.¹⁵ Many children ran away from school, but were returned by the agent upon threat of loss of rations. By 1891 two additional teachers and two more nuns had been added and the school was maintaining a steady 'enrollment' of one-hundred children.

When children arrived at HFMS they were 'disinfected' with kerosene, their hair was cut, and traditional clothing was replaced with military-style school uniforms. Many children were given new anglicized names, and all children were strictly forbidden to speak their own language (Reyhner & Elder, 2004). If a child did speak Blackfoot in the presence of a priest, brother, or nun, their mouth was "either washed out with soap or they were beaten" (BF01). The school focused on learning English, reading, writing, and religious studies for a few hours each weekday. The boys spent the rest of the day farming and raising cattle, while the girls worked on the skills necessary for employment as a domestic servant.

Perhaps the most culturally devastating 'lesson' taught at the mission school was that the Blackfeet themselves were 'savages' that needed to be saved by assimilation to 'white'

¹⁵ Nearly 600 (1/3 of the entire tribe) Blackfeet died of starvation due to the illegal selling and use of rations by BIA agents.

culture and conversion to Catholicism. Assimilation leapt beyond the border of HFMS and into the reservation encampments. It was the Jesuits, who in their earnest attempts to save the Indian souls reached out to the students' parents and implored them to change their 'savage' ways for the sake of their children. Men were vilified for having more than one wife, and their children were referred to as bastards if they were not 'married' in the eyes of God. The Sun Dance was branded pagan and forbidden for any baptized tribal members upon threat of losing Gods' favor (Wissler, 1918). The ideals preached by the priests and nuns were reinforced by the children on the rare occasions in which they were allowed to spend time with their families. The children were becoming "good Catholics" (BF06).

Holy Family Mission School was financed by the Catholic Church and the United States government. The Church viewed the mission as a means to spread Catholic doctrine to the Blackfeet, while the government saw the Church's role as administrators of assimilation. The HFMS purposefully separated the children from their families in an assimilationist manner, under the auspices that this separation from Native culture would allow them to join modern society (Reyhner, 2004). Although it may appear that the Jesuit's and Ursuline's developed the HFMS and its curriculum out of a sincere belief that the only way to save the Blackfeet was to civilize them through education; I argue that in reality the Church's attempt at 'saving' the Blackfeet was a disturbing blend of ethnocentrism and paternalism, both elements of settler-colonialism.

Blackfeet, Catholic Church, & Settler-Colonialism Theory

When colonialism reached the Northern Plains the way of life for the powerful and affluent Blackfeet Nation took a drastic and permanent change. There was a gradual, but dramatic shift from autonomy toward dependence, most notable with the decline of buffalo (Harrod, 1971). With the disappearance of the buffalo came an economic collapse creating a forced reliance on the government and its institutions. The government was willing to use whatever means necessary to deal with the 'Indian problem' and the Catholic Church willingly stepped into their role as a governmental tool to force assimilation through education and conversion.

Settler-colonialist imposed structures were designed to destroy indigenous peoples by elimination or assimilation. Wolfe (2006) describes the effectiveness of these processes in which the "outcome of the logic of elimination [included] child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as mission or boarding schools..." (p. 391).

Many indigenous scholars contend that the foundation of tribal culture is native language and religion. Duane Mistaken Chief, Sr., (2000) of the Blackfoot Confederacy considers native language to "hold much of what we need to know about ourselves" and points out that a cultures' language "reveals their philosophies" (p. 26). Blackfoot is the language historically spoken by all three nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy. Blackfoot belongs to the Algonquian family, with each tribe of the confederacy speaking a slightly different dialect (Ambler, 2004). The differences in dialect from tribe to tribe did not cause difficulty in communication, and was distinct enough that Blackfoot speakers could identify a fellow speaker's tribal affiliation (Frantz, 1991).

Today on the Blackfeet Reservation, it is difficult to find a tribal member fluent in Blackfoot¹⁶. The majority of adults living on the reservation are born and raised there, yet very few tribal members themselves speak, or know anyone who speaks Blackfoot.

Like many anthropologists, Mistaken Chief believes that culture is deeply imbedded in religion. Tribal culture lives through stories, religion, and philosophies; and without the tribal language many of the historical elements essential to cultural continuity and religion are lost. Intentionally eliminating tribal language is a primary stepping stone to cultural genocide. The Catholic Church, in their zeal to convert and ‘civilize’ Native children, was instrumental in eliminating the native language of the Blackfeet by shaming Native speaking children and its strict policy of ‘English only’ within the mission school environment.

Previous research of indigenous peoples indicate that the frequency of suicide among adolescent Native Americans is more than double the national rate; and although their “despair and hopelessness have many causes, it may be related to loss of culture and language” (Ambler, 2004, p. 9). The Blackfeet Reservation has immense poverty, low graduation rates, unemployment, and substance abuse. These desperate conditions raise questions about whether language loss has a causal or interdependent relationship with economic and social problems. Native Cheyenne linguist Richard Littlebear believes there is a strong correlation between Native culture and language, arguing that “embedded in this [Native] language are the lessons that guide our daily lives. We cannot leave behind the essence of our being” (2004, p. 12).

¹⁶ In contrast to the Blackfeet Nation, the Blood Nation of Canada (also part of the Blackfoot Confederacy), had similar Catholic and Methodist mission school experiences yet they have maintained their tribal tongue remarkably well. This contrast suggests that further research comparing and contrasting the Blackfeet/Blood experience is needed.

The Blackfeet Nation has initiated several language revitalization programs on the reservation, through the Blackfeet Community College and Cut Woods School¹⁷; yet language revitalization may not be enough for the Blackfeet Nation to embrace their culture language, and identity. I argue that revitalization will not be complete until the enduring history of settler-colonialist assimilating oppression is first understood and processed by the Blackfeet people.¹⁸

¹⁷ A private total immersion school program for Blackfeet children in grades K-8.

¹⁸ As a registered descendent of the Blackfeet Nation, who listened to 'reservation' stories from my mother (born and raised on reservation), grandmother (a student of the Holy Family Mission School), and numerous other Blackfeet family members, the importance of coming to terms with our history has both personal and professional significance. As a Blackfeet and an anthropologist I recognize that the losses and oppression experienced by my ancestors continues to affect and diminish my family and tribe today, and is oppositional to the true nature of the Blackfeet.

Conclusion

Indigenous scholars define the United States and Canada as settler-colonial nations (Gilo-Whitaker). Effectively, this means that settler-colonialism is a process that remains pervasively entrenched throughout American society today. In justification of their domination, settler-colonialists manipulate historical narratives that marginalize, or erase, the very existence of indigenous societies through such means as the forced assimilation into their own culture experienced by the Blackfoot Nation via the Holy Family Mission School. The Catholic Church may have been unaware of the implications of its settler-colonialist actions during its fifty years of Blackfoot education through the HFMS; however, that ignorance does not excuse their actions. Assimilation through education was an attempt by the government to create either a homogeneous society, or eliminate the Blackfeet, and the Catholic Church acted as administrators of assimilation. Language, culture, and religious beliefs were lost through assimilation and the Blackfeet became one of the most marginalized groups in the United States today.

The Holy Family Mission School left some lasting effects on students and their descendants. The negative cultural impacts of the HFMS experience continue to perpetrate a disjoint between the Blackfeet and the surrounding settler-colonialist society. HFMS contributed to the ration mentality prevalent on the reservation today by deciding *for* [as opposed to] *with* the Blackfeet, what it was they needed to identify their place in a new society. Forcing Blackfeet children to attend HFMS under threat of ration loss reinforced the settler-colonialist agenda of white power and control. In addition, they [the Church] perpetuated the notion that white ‘benefactors’ would give the Blackfeet what they needed as long as the Blackfeet capitulated to white superiority. The Blackfeet have been brainwashed by the settler-colonialist government for nearly 200 years into believing that they [Blackfeet]

are the false cultural caricatures invented by those in power (White 1990 – p. 281). The Catholic Church reinforced ration mentality by teaching children that only through behaving as settler-colonialist could they receive the necessities of life. The ration mentality has permeated into Blackfeet mentality so pervasively that the Blackfeet have become their own oppressors. It is not uncommon to hear reservation tribal members express their displeasure with the governmental control over them, yet when I asked a tribal member if the government should step back and allow the people to experience true sovereignty he replied, “Oh no. We couldn’t do that. We are like children and need them to tell us what to do.” (BF01).

Everything the Blackfeet once knew about themselves as a people has been denied and suppressed by settler-colonialist oppression; culture, language, and sense of purpose in the world has all been taken or reconfigured into a formula acceptable to their white ‘benefactors’. Wolfe (2006) states that “settler-colonialism destroys to replace” (p. 388). Unfortunately for the Blackfeet that which was destroyed has not been replaced. The Holy Family Mission School was instrumental in destroying Blackfeet language, culture, and religion and replacing it with English, western culture, and Catholicism, effectively defining the role of the Catholic Church as a tool of the American settler-colonialist government. Wolfe focuses on Native land loss as a defining characteristic of settler-colonialism, I argue that while the taking of aboriginal land is the goal of colonialism, it is the deculturization incurred after the acts of land theft that continue to haunt and systematically strip from the Blackfeet that which makes them ‘Niitsitapi’¹⁹ or the ‘original people’.

¹⁹ Blackfoot word for ‘original people’. Pronounced phonetically: Knee-tsee-taw-pee.

My thesis shows that in the case of the Blackfeet Nation the Catholic Church worked as a voluntary tool of the settler-colonialist state. Through the HFMS, the Church facilitated forced assimilation of Blackfeet children under the guise of religious conversion. This assimilation legacy is on-going and continues to systematically strip away indigenous culture and replace it with the 'dominant' settler-colonialist culture (Wolfe, 2006).

This analysis of what role the Catholic Church played in the deculturization of the Blackfeet Nation is important, because the answer to the future of the Blackfeet lies in their past. The Blackfeet cannot continue to have a ration mentality and flourish. They must untie themselves from the authority of the settler-colonialist government, which includes the Catholic Church, for their way of thinking is not Blackfeet and will continue the oppression. No longer can the Blackfeet accept that their rights as a sovereign nation be rationed out as those in power see fit. Deculturization has nearly destroyed the Blackfeet as a people and is oppositional to the spirit of Niitsitapi. Only when the people understand and process what occurred in the past will they have the strength and confidence to embrace that which was lost and move forward.

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Appendix

Table 1-A

Assigned Identifier	BF01	BF02	BF03	BF04	BF05	BF06	BF07	BF08
Approx. Age	80	50	75	75	80	70	75	70
Sex	M	F	F	M	M	F	F	F
Tribal Affiliation	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Reservation Residence	On	On	On	On	On	Off	Off	Off
Religious Affiliation	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	-	Catholic	None	None



Saint Martin's University OMB Control number: 0990-0279

IORG number: 0004988

IRB number: 2015-1-17-EP

IRB Approval Date: Feb. 10, 2015

**Saint Martin's University
Consent to Act as a Subject in a Research Study**

Broken Spirit: The role of the Catholic Church in the deculturization of the Blackfeet Nation

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DESCRIPTION:

The purpose of this research is to determine what role the Catholic Church (via the Holy Family Mission School circa 1888-1940) played in the deculturization of the Blackfeet Nation. Information and data were gathered through archival documents, historical literature review, previous similar research, and informal interviews of 8 adult Blackfeet tribal members. Informal interviews with voluntary participants, drawn from enrolled members of the Blackfeet nation (both on and off of the reservation) will be conducted. Participants will choose the time and place of the interviews to ensure their own comfort levels. Conversational questions regarding the 'Holy Family Mission School' and the relationship/impact between the Catholic Church and the Blackfeet peoples will be asked by the researcher, with the participant choosing whether and how to respond. Participants may choose the direction and length of the conversation.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

This research does not pose any risk or require any special conditions for the participants. The interview data is included anonymously and reflects the participants views on the actions and

Participant's initials _____

